

BLACK FINGERNAILS AND THE WHITE PAGE:
THE HIGH SCHOOL WRITING CENTER

Brooke Fiesthumel
Virginia Tech
befiest@vt.edu

In walks a blonde-haired, hooded student to the Blacksburg High School Writing Center. She has brought a personal narrative to share and work on with me, an intern from Virginia Tech. She sits next to me, flips her hair and pleads, “I just can’t figure out the ending.” Reassuringly, I state that we will start from the beginning, work through the paper and hopefully figure out an answer to her writing concerns. As she begins to read, I hit a roadblock. Her narrative is gripping, heart-wrenching, and extremely personal. I am caught off guard by the raw, emotive power coming from the tiny frame next to me. As she speaks about her parent’s divorce, her lost faith in God, her lost faith in humanity, and her newfound philosophy on life, I question what to do or say.

Although I had vaguely understood that I might encounter different situations at the Blacksburg High School writing center than I was used to at Virginia Tech, this experience took me by surprise. My writing center training didn’t include much discussion of this type of soul-bearing, non-academic work. During my first sessions with this girl, I was slightly disoriented, but as she became a regular client, we began to fall into our own routine of toiling over her personal, non-academic pieces. My co-tutor, however, was under the impression that this type of work had no place in the writing center. When we were alone, she would sometimes accuse my client of being dramatic and hint that perhaps, by indulging this student, I was in danger of making her drama worse. Moreover, according to my co-tutor, I was taking up valuable time helping this client when some other students might show up with “real” writing—academic work. I had to wonder myself, what type of work is appropriate for the writing center? As her tutor, could I be responsible for making this girl more frantic, given the subject matter and intensity of our sessions?

Although this was my first contact with non-academic, emotional pieces while tutoring, perhaps my

client’s anguish is neither uncommon nor unfounded. Adolescence is marked by mood swings and general instability; in terms of the writing center, tutors should be aware of some characteristics of this age of rapid change and raging hormones. It is striking that suicide is the leading cause of death for adolescents and depression is the leading risk factor for suicidal thoughts and attempts. With 20% of all adolescents suffering from depression (10%-15% of adolescents in the U.S. are estimated to be depressed at a given time), the high school writing center tutor must be wary of what is often prevalent in the minds of their clients and be sensitive to their emotions (Garcia 166). Complex factors contribute to adolescents experiencing depression, including developmental stressors, peer relationships, school accomplishments, physical and emotional changes, environmental, and contextual stressors (Garcia 170). It seems that for some high school students, problems are unavoidable, and my client was not alone in her struggle; many kids have quite the plateful.

While much writing center scholarship addresses issues surrounding what services the writing center can or should offer to clients, fewer scholars have addressed what forms of writing may be less appropriate than others. According to Nancy Welsh’s landmark essay in *The Writing Center Journal*, “From Silence to Noise: the Writing Center as Critical Exile,” an essential, if not the essential, role of the writing center is being a place where emotional issues can be tackled and ideas formulated on sensitive issues. Because the “writing center is freed from the constraints of a predetermined curriculum and the normative force of grades,” this physical space, Welsh asserts, is the place for these issues to surface (Welsh 5). Considering that those who come into the center “carry with them conversations and arguments . . . already internalized, already being silently played in imagination,” the tutor must be willing to give the

client space for whatever needs to be worked through, instead of adding to the cacophony (Welsh 4). For writing centers to function as safe-havens from these other voices, it is necessary for tutors to accept emotional pieces as plausible, while not judging the positions of the writer or their chosen subject matter. My client desperately wanted what any writer visiting the center is looking for: a person to help her work through her pieces, sentence by sentence, word by word.

Still, after our intense sessions I had to wonder: the writing was getting better, but what about her? Was our focus on her issues—her loneliness, her parents' betrayal, her painful disconnection with friends and school—helping or harming her situation? This interest led me to a *Journal of Behavior Therapy & Experimental Psychiatry* study that questions whether certain writing is helpful or harmful for individuals getting over traumatic events. Participants who have experienced traumatic events were split up into groups; some wrote about neutral events, some described the upsetting event in great detail, and some focused on what upsets them now about the event. The results: all participants found solace in their writing, no matter which type they were assigned. This notion—that I could simply be there, as a writing center tutor, to work with any type of writing and trust that even delving into pieces about traumas maybe beneficial—was comforting.

During my time at Blacksburg High School, I began to see the importance of the high school writing center's unique position as a place where emotional, non-academic work can be seen as not only appropriate, but also powerful texts to work through during sessions. In the article, "The Writing Center as a Key Actor in Secondary School Preparation," Thomas Tobin describes the high school writing center as a safe haven for the growth and development of students as writers. Rather than shrinking away from subject matter that can be emotional, unresolved, or dramatic, tutors making the adjustment from college to high school writing centers need to prepare for and welcome this type of writing. Tobin argues that the center's safe-haven role creates a space in which secondary students will ultimately hone and

improve their writing skills, making the writing center the "hub of writing activity in secondary school," no matter the topic (Tobin 234).

In the sessions at Blacksburg High School, my client's private journals were treated just like other pieces of writing are treated during writing center sessions—we looked at focus, organization, style and development. To begin, we discussed global issues; expand on this point, maybe change this organization, and add more poignant phrase here. Halfway through this tedious work, I realized that it may not just be the paper's issues we were addressing: by bettering this piece we were clarifying her thoughts; by investigating the tone of the paper we were examining her feelings towards the event; by going through this experience we were ultimately putting the episode in perspective, working through her writing and emotional baggage simultaneously.

She chokes up. She tears up. We sit in reverence of the work we have accomplished, satisfied.

"Thank you so much, it really means a lot."

After this experience and toiling over such research, I saw the value of our sessions in a different light. Although initially in the tutoring chair I was disoriented and caught off guard, I now began to understand the importance of such emotional writing.

When a coach is able to help with a piece so close, so personal, they are allowed into the lives and world of the writer; if the writer is ready and willing to bring a piece of this nature into the writing center, the coach must be willing to listen. The high school writing center has the capacity to be a safe haven for those, like this girl, who need to address a trauma and be treated as the serious writers they often are. Ultimately, what it comes down to is this: the girl came into the BHS Writing Center that day with a piece of work close to her heart and left with her ideas in order, her piece bettered, and perhaps a little something more.

Works Cited

- Garcia, Carolyn. "Conceptualization and Measurement of Coping During Adolescence: A Review of the Literature." *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 42.2. (2010): 166-185. Web. 17 October 2010.

- Guastella, Adam J.; Dadds, Mark R. "Cognitive behavioural emotion writing tasks: A controlled trial of multiple processes." *Journal of Behavior Therapy & Experimental Psychiatry*, 39.4 (2008): 558-566, 9p. Web. 17 October 2010.
- Tobin, Thomas. "The Writing Center as a Key Actor in Secondary School Preparation." *Clearing House* 83.6 (2010): 230-234. Web. 17 Oct. 2010.
- Welsh, Nancy. "From Silence to Noise: The Writing Center as Critical Exile." *The Writing Center Journal*. 14.1 (1993): 1-15. Web. 17 October 2010.